

This review of Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot* (South End Press, 1993) was published in *The Fourth Decade* May 1994, 1.4, 22-23.

*Rethinking Camelot* is Noam Chomsky's worst book. I don't think it merits a detailed review, but we should be clear about the stand that "America's leading intellectual dissident," as he is often called, has taken on the assassination. It is not significantly different from that of the Warren Commission or the majority of Establishment journalists and government apologists, and diametrically opposed to the view "widely held in the grassroots movements and among left intellectuals" (p. 37) and in fact to the view of the majority of the population.

For Chomsky, the only theories of the assassination "of any general interest are those that assume a massive cover-up, and a high-level conspiracy that required that operation." These he rejects out of hand because "There is not a phrase in the voluminous internal record hinting at any thought of such a notion," and because the cover-up "would have to involve not only much of the government and the media, but a good part of the historical, scientific, and medical professions. An achievement so immense would be utterly without precedent or even remote analogue."

These arguments can be as glibly dismissed as Chomsky presents them. It is simply foolish to expect the conspirators to have left a paper trail, much less in the "internal record," or that part of it that has become public. It is equally foolish to confuse the notion of conspiracy and cover-up with the much more broadly applicable phenomenon of "manufacturing consent," to use Chomsky's own expression. You don't have to be a liar to believe or accept or perpetuate lies. This is exactly what Chomsky himself and Edward Herman say about the media, and it applies to the "historical, scientific, and medical professions" as well:

Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions, and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power. Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators who adjust to the realities of source and media organizational requirements and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power (*Manufacturing Consent*, NY: Pantheon, 1988, p. xii).

Nevertheless, Chomsky admits that a "high-level conspiracy" theory makes sense if "coupled with the thesis that JFK was undertaking radical policy changes, or perceived to be by policy insiders." *Rethinking Camelot* is devoted to refuting this thesis.

I've addressed this subject before ("Chomsky on JFK and Vietnam," *The Third Decade*, Vol. 9, No. 6, pp. 8-10), so I won't repeat myself. But two things should be clear. First, Chomsky has loaded the deck. The theory that Kennedy was secretly planning to withdraw from Vietnam regardless of how the military situation developed is not the only one that supports a conspiracy view of the assassination. This is John Newman's highly speculative argument in *JFK and Vietnam* (NY: Warner Books, 1992), which is so easy to refute that one wonders if it was not created for this purpose. Why else would the CIA, in the form of ex-Director Colby, praise the work of Newman, an Army intelligence officer, as "brilliant" and "meticulously researched" (jacket blurb)? In any case, accepting the fact that we cannot

know what JFK's secret intentions were or what he would have done, the fact that he was planning to withdraw by the end of 1965 is irrefutable.

Secondly, it should be clear that Chomsky's view of the relation, that is, non-relation, of the assassination to subsequent policy changes is essentially the same as Arthur Schlesinger's. They are both coincidence theorists. Schlesinger says Johnson reversed the withdrawal plan on Nov. 26 with NSAM 273, but the idea that this had anything to do with the assassination "is reckless, paranoid, really despicable fantasy, reminiscent of the wilder accusations of Joe McCarthy" (*Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 10, 1992). The assassination and the policy reversal, in other words, were coincidences.

I suspect Chomsky knows he would appear foolishly naive if he presented his position this way, so he has constructed a tortured and sophistic argument that "there was no policy reversal" in the first place, which, if true, would obviate the question of its relation to the assassination. A neat trick if you can pull it off, and Chomsky gives it a good try, but in the end he fails. In fact, he undermines his own position by making it even clearer than it has been that the reversal of the assessment of the military situation in Vietnam, which caused the reversal of the withdrawal policy, occurred very shortly after the assassination, and that the source of this new appraisal was the intelligence agencies:

The first report prepared for LBJ (November 23) opened with this "Summary Assessment": "The outlook is hopeful. There is better assurance than under Diem that the war can be won. We are pulling out 1,000 American troops by the end of 1963." ... The next day, however, CIA director John McCone informed the President that the CIA now regarded the situation as "somewhat more serious" than had been thought, with "a continuing increase in Viet Cong activity since the first of November" (the coup). Subsequent reports only deepened the gloom (p. 91).

By late December, McNamara was reporting a "sharply changed assessment" to the President (p. 92).

The only difference between this and Schlesinger's view is that Chomsky says the assessment of the military situation changed first, and then the policy changed. So what? The point is that both things changed after the assassination. The President is murdered, and immediately afterward the military assessment changes radically and the withdrawal policy changes accordingly. It matters not a whit if the policy reversal occurred with NSAM 273, as Schlesinger says, or began in early December and ended de jure in March 1964, as the Gravel Pentagon Papers clearly say (Vol. 2, pp. 191, 196).

Nor does it matter what JFK's secret intentions may have been. It is more important to note that according to Chomsky's own account, whose accuracy I do not doubt, the source of the radically changed assessment that began two days after the assassination was the CIA and the other intelligence agencies. Furthermore, this change in assessment was retrospective, dating the deterioration of the military situation from Nov. 1 or earlier. Why did it take the intelligence agencies a month or more to suddenly realize, two days after the assassination, that they had been losing the war instead of winning it?

This question may be insignificant to coincidence theorists like Schlesinger and Chomsky, but not to me. *Rethinking Camelot* has shown me -- sadly, because I have been an admirer -

- that Chomsky needs to do some serious rethinking of his position, and that I need to do some rethinking of Mr. Chomsky.

